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ABSTRACT

Beliefs about texts and textbooks is an active area of inquiry in social psychology but the results of these studies are largely unknown in the fields of English education and composition. For most students knowledge and beliefs function very similarly. What a student knows he or she inevitably believes; and what he or she believes means a commitment in ways that exclude more current information, more authoritative sources, or more persuasive logic. Students use their initial beliefs (or knowledge) as a filter to reinforce what they already know rather than examine and possibly rethink positions. Further, most students consider it a sign of strong character to ignore information that is contradictory to their beliefs and to resist doubts about their current knowledge of the world. Finally, studies show that contrary to popular belief, students actually believe very little of what they read in textbooks. Textbooks are most likely to be effective when the material presented is neither too similar nor too contradictory to students' current knowledge; it should be clear and comprehensible and not too conceptually difficult. Research in the field of composition has for years pointed towards the advantages of student-centered writing instruction, and it is significant to note that research in social psychology corroborates these findings. (Contains 20 references.) (TB)

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BELIEFS ABOUT TEXTBOOKS: IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION

BY

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Everyday in classrooms, teachers and students think about, and with, texts and textbooks. The beliefs about what textbooks are, who creates them, and how to evaluate them are an influence, often a profoundly important one, on how teachers use texts and how students react to the information in them.

Consider the rituals of textbook distribution and use: Someone (usually the instructor or a group of instructors, never students) selects the texts. Students are told which parts of the book are to be read at which times; marking in the book is penalized; what is tested is tied explicitly to what is in the text; and the textbook is withdrawn when content has supposedly been mastered.

Whether we reflect on beliefs underlying these practices or not, those who participate in this ritual year after year reinforce the authority of textbooks. In such classrooms students are highly likely to view the textbook as icon. And like religious icons that serve primarily decorative purposes, textbooks viewed in this manner will have little effect on a student's intellectual growth. To date several studies have shown that students believe that information in textbooks has little meaning or value in their lives (Baker & Freebody, 1989;

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Brown, 1988; Garner & Chambliss, 1995)).

Beliefs about texts and textbooks is an active area of inquiry in social psychology but the results of these studies are largely unknown in the fields of English education and composition. The field of social psychology has a long tradition of studying beliefs and attitudes (Abelson, 1986). Social psychologists have conducted literally hundreds of studies to determine how beliefs influence the processing of information. They have examined under what conditions information is most likely to be considered and under what conditions information is most likely to be ignored. Students and teachers, children and adults, men and women, the rich and poor all have different beliefs about books, particularly textbooks, and these beliefs influence what is taught and not taught, and what is learned and not learned in classrooms. For those of us in a profession that uses textbooks, the results of these studies can be very revealing.

Studies have determined quite convincingly that students, even very young children, do not come to school as blank slates, but rather with extensive and often elaborate ideas about the world and how it works. Research on the tenaciousness of prior knowledge indicates that new information or knowledge is learned only under very specific circumstances in relation to already existing knowledge (Garner & Chambliss, 1995; Dochy, 1992). Several studies have shown that students view information in textbooks as having little meaning or value in their lives--a

situation that may be neither new nor shocking to those of us who have been teaching for a few years. However this view is compounded by three other less well-known insights which are suggested from recent research in social psychology.

First, for most students, and indeed most adults, knowledge and beliefs function very similarly (Gilbert, 1991). We tend to think of knowledge as information held in an objective and unbiased manner, amenable to change given more current or authoritative information. We belong to professional organizations like FCTE, attend conferences, and read journals like this one with the assumption that we will add to our understanding and knowledge of issues related to teaching English or language arts. Research in social psychology shows that such learning very rarely occurs however, at least in the unbiased and objective way we would like to think (Lord, et al., 1979). What we know we also inevitably believe; and what we believe, we are committed to in ways that exclude more current information, more authoritative sources, or more persuasive logic. We use our initial beliefs (and knowledge) as a filter to reinforce what we already know rather than to examine and possibly rethink our positions. The power of beliefs to distort information has been repeatedly demonstrated, and knowledge and beliefs are interchangeable in this regard (Harvey, 1986).

Secondly, most students feel it is a sign of strong

character to ignore information that is contradictory to one's beliefs and to resist doubts about one's current knowledge of the world. In our students' view, in other words, it is morally imperative to put blinders on and keep them on when exposed to information that contradicts what they already know. In fact when presented with a written text that offers information that contradicts their beliefs about an issue, most students do not modify their beliefs but become more committed and certain of their original positions (Olson & Astington, 1993).

Thirdly, contrary to the prevailing notion that when something is printed in a book it is likely to be believed, studies show that students actually believe very little of the information presented in textbooks (Baker & Freebody, 1989; Dochy, 1992). They might be able to process the information sufficiently to demonstrate competence or even mastery of it, but few students internalize the information in a way that allows for a permanent restructuring of their knowledge base, which partially explains why student retention of information often lasts only until test day.

Research in the field of social psychology suggests that ignorance is a far more pro-active phenomenon than teachers are likely to think, and it is a gross misnomer to see our students as willing learners, eager to accept either our pronouncements or the information contained in textbooks. These observations about students pertain uniformly to the motivated and unmotivated alike. Honor students are no more likely to

accept new information than the academically weaker students, which suggests that beyond one's general intellectual ability or one's specific verbal or text processing skills, there are attributes of the human character that contribute to or constrain ones' view about what one knows or believes (Wilson, et al., 1993).

We need to keep these findings in mind when designing our courses, preparing our lectures, and choosing our texts. Fortunately the picture is not as grim as it might seem, and research does provide a framework for understanding when belief change and learning is most likely. Generally speaking, the following facts hold: If new information is compatible to a student's initial position or knowledge base, it will be viewed by that students as adding nothing to her knowledge and little or no change or learning will take place. Information that is incompatible with existing knowledge will be viewed as even more incompatible than it actually is and will be rejected or ignored, with very little learning or change taking place. The greatest learning will take place when new information is perceived as moderately different from existing knowledge (Fazio, 1986; Krosnick, 1988).

Extending these findings to our classrooms, it is easy to see the challenges facing teachers as we use and assign texts in a course. Learning will take place only if students are moderately challenged by new information, and even then only if they are willing to take the time to think deeply and process

the information in a way which results in new memory representation or knowledge restructuring. Such processing takes effort, time, and energy, and individuals are limited in how much they want to do such effortful processing. The more difficult the text is, the less willing individuals are to try to understand it. The less involved the students are, the more likely they will ignore difficult information completely because they would have to think about the material to process it. Furthermore, the difficulty of material can do more than result in nonlearning; it can produce negative associations for a student. Students have been known to express dislike for subjects traditionally considered difficult, like math and science. An issue related to difficulty is comprehensibility. In general, when students can comprehend a message by repeating it to themselves -- in effect, establishing some "ownership" over it by thinking of their own supporting arguments for the position advocated, they are more likely to be persuaded by it.

Thus textbooks which meet the following conditions may cause learning to occur: The material presented is neither too similar nor too contradictory to students' current knowledge; it is clear and comprehensible; and it is not too conceptually difficult. Although these conditions may be helpful, they do not assure that learning will occur. Research in social psychology shows that deep thinking or processing of ideas in the text is essential (Lord, et al., 1988). However the research

also shows that students do not tend to think deeply and process the information critically unless they have a reason to do so (Krosnick, 1988).

What can textbook authors and teachers do to promote deep thinking and central change? Studies have examined many routes to improve learning from texts, and I would like to conclude by looking at one such route that is especially relevant to the teaching of writing.

Research in the field of composition has for years pointed towards the advantages of student-centered writing instruction, and it is significant to note that research in social psychology corroborates some of the advantages to such a pedagogy (Brown and Briggs, 1991; Dole, et al., 1991). Students in traditional English classrooms with a heavy emphasis on the use teacher-direct discussion, literary models, and grammar and usage textbooks, and students in classrooms emphasizing student writing shared with peer audiences showed significant differences in their willingness to consider and be persuaded by new textbook material. In classrooms where students compare and critique versions of their own writing, where students make predictions about classmates' intentions in their writing, where they publish their writing and compile class books for real audiences other than the teacher, students begin to see themselves as belonging to the community of text-producers. Studies show that their perception of authorship is more critical and more sophisticated (Valencia & Place, 1994; Weiss, 1994). Textbooks are seen less

as remote, meaningless icons and more as the work of fellow writers. As a result students are more sympathetic to new, even contradictory information and more willing to invest the time and energy required for deep thinking and critical reflection necessary for knowledge restructuring. Their first-hand experience of the process of authorship promotes a sense of "ownership" over new material in textbooks even when it is at odds with their current knowledge base. Students become more willing to problem solve the author's intended meaning and develop a sense of ownership and control of that meaning because such skills are promoted in relevant critiques of their own and their classmates' writing (Hutton, et al., 1994). Ironically, research suggests that learning from textbooks is facilitated by spending less time on reading and discussing textbooks and more time giving students the experience of creating written texts of their own, and sharing and discussing those texts with each other.

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